

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NATION BUILDING

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“There is nothing in an age that so sharply mirrors its philosophy as the lives of its women”.

Walter Farrell

ABSTRACT

The task of nation building requires the participation of all regardless of their race, ethnicity or gender in the creation of a strong state. The challenge of balancing between the need for unity and the recognition for diversity in the course of nation building is manifest not just in the interaction between Kenyans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds but also between the different genders. Strathmore University's motto 'that all may be one' articulates the institution's commitment to contribute through education to this task of nation building in a spirit of unity of races, ethnicities and gender. The appreciation of the need for gender equality has led to the enshrining of affirmative principles in Kenya's new Constitution to ensure the participation of women at all levels of national decision making. This important milestone provides the opportunity to reflect on the role of women in nation building and thus the education that women should receive in order to prepare them to effectively contribute to nation building. This paper reflects on this by addressing the questions: What makes woman "woman"?; and What type of education does she need so as to make that unique contribution to nation building that only she can make?

BACKGROUND

Kenya has recently promulgated a new Constitution that enshrines the will of its people and articulates their values and goals for the nation (constitution of Kenya 2010). Among the notable principles of the new Constitution is the recognition of the equality of the genders and

thus the inclusion of explicit provisions ensuring the participation of women at all levels of national decision making. Article 27(3) states:

“Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.”

Further on Article 27 (6) states:

“To give full effect to the realisation of the rights guaranteed under this Article, the State shall take legislative and other measures, including affirmative action programmes and policies designed to redress any disadvantage suffered by individuals or groups because of past discrimination.”

This affirmative action was necessary to remedy many years of inequality manifest by the lack of gender parity in education and access to social, economic and political opportunities. The inclusion in the Constitution of provisions requiring the representation of women in different levels of national decision making is an important step in addressing the gender disparities.

Millennium Development Goal Number 3 and 5 promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. Besides, women are expected to play a key role in contributing towards meeting most of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), on poverty reductions, mortality and morbidity reduction, environmental protection among other goals. The objective is to eradicate gender inequality in all levels of education by 2015. Up till now the variance between rhetoric and reality persists. The 2015 education equality at all levels target will most likely be missed.

While acknowledging the efforts made by various parties we must also admit that, it marks only the beginning in so far as the task for women now lies ahead of them. A lot more still needs to be done to ensure the full participation of women in the political and economic lives of their countries. Women having gained access to positions of decision making must now contribute to the task of nation building.

THE CHALLENGE

In order for women to contribute effectively to the task of nation building they must begin by considering their specific essence and thus determine the unique contribution they as women are called to make in society. St Josemaría the inspiration behind Strathmore University gave some distinctive characteristics of women:

“.....characteristics which are their own and which they alone can give: their gentle warmth and untiring generosity, their love for detail, their quick-wittedness and intuition, their simple and deep piety, their constancy... A woman’s femininity is genuine only if she is aware of the beauty of this

contribution for which there is no substitute and if she incorporates it into her own life.”¹

This means that Kenyan women must ask the question ‘who are we’ in order to determine what they can give to the nation. Education has an important role to play in this process as it provides the platform for addressing this fundamental question on the essence of woman. As Kenyan women grapple with these questions, it is crucial for Strathmore and other Kenyan educational institutions to facilitate through the education provided the discovery of the true essence of women and thus their unique contribution to society.

THE ESSENCE OF WOMAN

Due to early trends in feminism, the perception that woman is what she can do, still lingers in society. The early feminists had to struggle against discriminatory laws and socio-cultural attitudes that were founded on the supposition that women were inferior to men. In a bid to counter this, women fought for the right to do all that men could do as a means of proving equality. On the basis of such a view, it has been concluded that women in the 21st century have made important inroads in the quest for equality. To support this, evidence is sought to show that most women today enjoy at least in theory equal rights of participation in social and political life. The new roles of women are regarded a part of who she is. Understood in this sense, woman’s nature is regarded as a reality that is changing as her roles change with time.

The above view is challenged by the Steinian notion of woman. Edith Stein, a philosopher and arguably a feminist, though she did not regard herself as one, wrote extensively about the woman and the vocation of women. Stein points out that “humanity is a dual species, masculine and feminine, which cannot be changed with varying circumstances and factors” (Stein, 1959). The true essence of a woman thus concerns how a woman exists, rather than the jobs that she can do. This concept of woman suggests that what is truly feminine does not change despite the change in roles or perceived roles of women in society.

Stein’s point of departure was the ontology of woman as the basis of true femininity. However, while adopting an essentialist view of the woman, she is careful not to stereotype individual women (Stein, 1959). She appreciates that within the duality of the species just as across there are differences.

¹ *Conversations with Msgr Josemaría Escriva de Balaguer*, 87

A Characteristics flowing from her essence

According to Stein, the physical differences between men and women profoundly mark their personalities. The woman's body stamps her soul with particular qualities that are common to all women but different from distinctively masculine traits. She saw these differences as complementary and not hierarchical in value and thus argued that they should be recognized and not abhorred (Stein, 1959). She recognizes the unique value of femininity and its crucial mission in the world. Her philosophy on woman could help Kenyan women contribute to the restoration of the proper hierarchy of values in a spirit of complementarity as opposed to competition. Her conception of woman allows for the balance required between unity and diversity which, as already mentioned is an important element of nation building.

Having clarified the essence of women from an ontological perspective, Stein sought to identify the characteristics flowing from the essence of women and which therefore mark the nature of their contribution to society. She observed that one of the fundamental characteristic closely linked to a woman's essence her maternal nature. This maternal nature is understood not purely as a physical motherhood but also as spiritual motherhood. Spiritual motherhood like physical motherhood, demands spousal love, that is, the gift of self. The key and core of woman is to be mother and companion. The distinctive feminine nature belongs essentially to the woman in any role that she plays whether married or single. Women are thus called to highlight the centrality of the role of motherhood in society.

Stein asserts that motherhood is the calling, the vocation, which is inscribed in the very nature of woman from the very beginning of time. Woman's life would more geared towards procreation and the education of posterity. It is the woman who is more properly entrusted with the guardianship of life. How Kenyan women can exercise motherhood in nation building becomes the question.

Further, due to the close connection with human development, woman seeks and embraces whatever is living, personal, and whole. Woman naturally focuses on what is human, and tends to give relationships a higher importance than work, success, reputation, etc (Stein, 1959). This explains why women approach moral questions with more consideration of the people affected by their actions and decisions than to abstract and impersonal considerations of duty, rights, and justice. Woman is ordinarily more attuned to the individual, and hence to a concrete, particular person with all of his or her own needs and potential.

This notion of woman is founded on Thomistic concepts as Stein was influenced by St. Thomas's view of the human person. St. Thomas insisted upon the subsistent unity of the person, body

and soul, since each natural substance is a composite of form and matter. Further, since matter is what distinguishes one human being from another, the body is essential to the person, and not simply a machine or a shell for the soul that could be discarded without serious loss to the “real” self. Stein thus observes that in general the soul, the principle of life of the individual perceives its own being in the stirrings of the emotions (Garcia, 1997). Through the emotions, the individual gains a deeper sense of self and consequently appreciates better the relationship with the other. The tendency of women to be more emotional predisposes them to better grasp the inherent value of exterior realities, that is their principle or soul. Women thus have a greater capacity to engage with the whole reality having comprehended its existential core. (Stein 1996)

In her dissertation “the problem of empathy Stein describes empathy as a clear awareness of another person, not simply of the content of his experience, but of his experience of that content. In empathy, one takes the place of the other without becoming strictly identical to him. It is not just understanding the experiences of the other, but in some sense taking them on as one’s own. (Garcia, 1997)

This notion of women’s characteristics based on Stein is balanced and recognises that some of the aspects flowing from her essence make a woman more susceptible to certain faults. Referring to woman’s emotions, she observes that this can be both a source of strength and frailty. Women need an interaction with the outside world. They need to take and give to other people on an objective level. If not they become hyper hysterical or hyper feminine. Stein asserts that if women are left on their own they can get into a great deal of trouble. She proposes an allowance of masculine nature as an antidote for hyper femininity. The masculine activities and inclinations belong to the makeup of a woman if she is to achieve her larger goal, her true femininity that includes personal freedom and autonomy of self and others. This balance is not aimed at transforming her nature to a masculine one.

An appreciation of the characteristics proper to women, enable her to better understand her role in society. Woman is called to bring to society her own unique characteristics. She must thus understand her role in the context of her essence and the special characteristics of her essence. St Josemaria urges women not to fall into the trap of imitating men, that equality means that a woman’s feminine way of being is legitimate and valuable. In the public arena, he refutes the implication that there may be specific tasks for women alone:

“As I said earlier, in this field what is specific is not the task or position itself, but the way in which the work is done. There are values which a woman more readily perceives, and her specific

contribution will often, therefore, change the whole approach to a problem, and can lead to the discovery of completely new approaches”²

THE ROLE OF WOMAN IN NATION BUILDING

Speaking on the role of women in national life, Stein urged, “The nation...doesn’t simply need what we have. It needs what we are.” This assertion can be applied in all arenas that a woman finds herself and forms a useful background for Kenyan women as they reflect on their call to contribute to nation building.

Through the exercise of her maternal vocation, woman preserves certain values in society which are invaluable. In the case of physical motherhood, woman plays a crucial role in the determination of societal values as the task of educating children in values is primarily hers. Woman is thus called to contribute to society’s values by inculcating in her physical children these values. As noted earlier, her maternal role is not constrained to biological motherhood. Woman’s role in educating in values transcends the family or home and extends to society as a whole. Kenyan women must thus not lose sight of this role which they can exercise in whatever position they occupy in society. Currently, Kenya is mourning one of it’s the greatest African Heroine, Margaret Atieno Ogola. She was a nationalist, doctor writer, mother and wife

During the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995 she clearly pointed out the role of women in society:

“The woman is the heart of the family, and the family is the corner stone of society, therefore it is very fitting that we should be here in Beijing for the Fourth World Women's Conference seeking new ways to enhance her well being, natural talents and gifts. The woman is a powerhouse of creativity, development and peace. Conflict between men and women is therefore unnecessary because a woman brings an equal and powerful complementarity to the common human condition. Women have been entrusted with the capacity to transmit life which is the most precious gift that anybody can give or receive. Without life no other good is possible”.

The fact that women’s central core is linked to motherhood does not mean that they are precluded from any other profession besides those related to this maternal characteristic. Given that men and women are different and that each has a unique contribution to make to society, women should be found in all aspects of social and professional life. When Stein was asked if women should be confined to the domestic realm, the “home and hearth”, her response was a

² *Conversations with Msgr Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, 90

resounding no. Involvement of women in public life may not necessarily translate into a seizing of power but rather constitutes the public witness that only women can offer. Besides, decisions made in the public sphere have tremendous impact on the family and society in general this leads them to take a keen interest in them.

When asked whether the natural vocation of women ruled out certain professions as unsuitable for her, Stein answered: "One could say that in case of need, every normal and healthy woman is able to hold a position. And there is no profession which cannot be practiced by a woman." It is likely that some professions will continue to attract more women than men, partly because of their strong human component. We might expect to find a large percentage of women drawn to fields like teaching, medicine, law, social work, psychology, etc. Obviously, not everyone can make a choice when entering the job market as to what sort of work they would find most attractive, and many women (along with many men) will work at jobs which are not especially suited to them. However all professions can be practiced in a feminine way; that is, every profession can be humanized, made more person-friendly, and brought into greater contact with human concerns (Garcia, 1997). Stein sums it up by saying:

*"The fact that all powers which the man possesses are present in the feminine nature as well - even though they may generally appear in different degrees and relationships - is an indication they should be employed in corresponding activity."*³

Whether as mothers in families, as a vital presence in the work force and the institutions of society Kenyan women need to exercise their proper role as well as their particular charisms and talents if they are to contribute effectively to nation building. They have an indispensable role to play in creating that "human ecology" which society and the world at large so urgently need. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI summarises the role of women in society as:

".....bearers of love, teachers of mercy and artisans of peace. Their greatest role is that of bringing warmth and humanity to a world that all too often judges the value of a person by the cold criteria of usefulness and profit. This effectively contributes to the advancement of a culture of true humanity and the building of the civilization of love."

The capacity of women to excel in all professions is arguably a fact already attested to by history. Women today have proved themselves capable in careers formerly closed to them (Becker, 2010). However, this must not be translated as automatic evidence of the increased contribution of women in the task of nation building. In many cases, the inclusion of women in the professional and public spheres has not been in the circumstances necessary to foster a

³ Stein, *Essays on Woman*, pp. 79.

contribution based on their unique essence. Women have found themselves in a situation analogous to that of 'outsiders in an exclusive club'. As a result, their ability to enjoy the pleasures of being a woman while exercising these professions is hampered. Women have found themselves forced to imitate men so as to 'fit in' but also confused on how to remain women while doing so (Becker, 2010).

Without a clear appreciation of femininity, women's identity is lost in the search for equality. As more Kenyan women make enter the public sphere, they must be careful not to fall into the trap of imitating men, but rather that maintain a true sense of equality that appreciates that a woman's feminine way of being is legitimate and valuable.

The world today needs women who are aware and faithful to their nature and hence their role. Their greatest task is the nurturing and rebuilding of human values that will avert humanity's self destruction. John Paul II (1988) puts it this way:

"In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favours some, it pushes others to the margins of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human. In this sense, our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that 'genius' which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human."

Women thus have a central contribution to make to national development. At these crucial moments of the history of the Kenyan nation, women ought not to lose sight of their role as protector and teacher of humanity. In order to fulfil this role, they must understand what true humanity means which understanding is dependent on their understanding their unique essence. The education of women must be geared towards this.

STRATHMORE UNIVERSITY AND THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

Fifty years ago, several men and women embarked on two separate projects which shared a common aim, which was to educate young men and women in the task of nation building in a spirit of work and truth confirmed in the unity of races, gender and ethnicity. Strathmore College and Kianda College would later merge to form Strathmore University. As noted in the foregoing sections the founder of Strathmore shared Stein's notion of the equality of men and women and their respective unique roles in society. The start of these projects coincided with the birth of the Kenyan nation after many years of colonial rule.

The granting of the Charter establishing Strathmore University coincides with another turning point in the history of the Kenyan nation, the end of civil disturbance following post-election

violence and the commitment to the reform process that would usher in a new Constitution. The coincidences are not by chance, but rather are a clear indication of the role of the institution in preparing Kenyans to build and grow a strong nation in a spirit of unity.

This conference provides an opportunity to reflect on the role of the institution in educating young women who can embrace the task of nation building. The education provided must be consistent with the spirit of its founder of equality of all men and the consequent appreciation of the true essence of woman.

Stein defined the concept of education as the formation of human personality. It is the process through which human personality takes form under various influences within and without the person and not merely an external possession of knowledge (Stein, 1959). Strathmore's ethos is based on an appreciation of this reality. The University seeks to form the entire individual providing an education that is not simply limited to a future professional task but that embodies other aspects of the person such as their human and spiritual realms. Strathmore educators must strive to ensure that the education of students is directed not just at the external capacity of women but rather at their unique inner form so as to develop mature feminine personalities. For woman to be aware of this vital role she would need an education that perfects her as a human being but as a woman as well.

Given that the essence of woman is distinct from that of man; her training must be directed at her person and should be in harmony with her essence and prepare her to take up the roles proper to her in nation building. These roles are the key to her nature and intrinsic value as woman. By its mentoring system, Strathmore provides a unique opportunity for female students to be mentored by female staff in the unique aspects of the feminine essence and thus to prepare them to enter into the public sphere without losing their unique identity.

Educators in Strathmore must be aware of the inherited deficiencies of the current education system which was largely a product of the enlightenment period (Stein, 1959). The system's over-rating of encyclopaedic knowledge as the end product of education risks ignoring the more personal aspects of education. Further, as the system was initially male-oriented and male-dominated, the inclusion of women and of feminine ideals continues to be a major challenge. For example, the system of education and the very organisation of educational institutions is designed to assert individuality rather than valuing relationships. Kenyan women and more specifically women in Strathmore must work at changing this. Education should lead women to affirm and develop the powers proper to their feminine nature and their individuality.

As Stein asserts woman plays a complementary role to man as one hand does the other and therefore this re-designing of the education system and organisation of educational institutions need not be conceived in a context of competition. Women must maintain their own perspective to issues and develop their individuality but in a spirit of camaraderie with their male counterparts.

Women must take advantage of the interaction with men in educational institutions like Strathmore to appreciate the uniquely male characteristics and the complementarity of these with their own qualities. For example as woman is emotion centered she must learn to appreciate and where necessary to develop objectivity, a characteristic that is more common in the male essence. Objectivity is needed to help her avoid a hyper feminine personal attitude which is apt to make her a nuisance. The woman's view is personal –geared towards the person and relationship, and she is driven to develop herself and those about her in a total humanity. The interaction of men with women in the context of education must also serve as an opportunity for men to appreciate this subjective dimension of reality.

EMOTIONAL EDUCATION OF WOMEN

For both men and women, "the intellect is the key to the kingdom of the spirit The intellect must be pressed into activity. It cannot become bright and sharp enough," but purely intellectual knowing does not result in real formation of the person unless the knowledge is interiorized. The training of the intellect should not be extended at the expense of the schooling of the heart. The mean should be the target (Stein, 1959). As women are emotion centered, the educator must make greater effort to achieve the happy mean.

Baseheart (1989) argues that forming the emotions is very important, since emotions hold a central position in changing personal attitudes and actions, but it cannot carry out its task without the cooperation of intellect and will. Emotion needs the light of the intellect and the discipline of the will. If these are lacking, emotional life becomes a compulsion without direction. Strathmore's inclusion of philosophical anthropology in all courses provides an opportunity to educate both female and male youth in these aspects. The essence of the pedagogical goal is to help the students; male and female to understand themselves better and thus improve their relations with others.

Apart from technical formation a good dose of liberal formation will allow women to develop a greater appreciation of their identity. Due to their clear connection with the living and personal the liberal arts are more attractive and appealing to women and this should not be regarded as a failure or sign of weakness. Stein suggests that even if the development curriculum for

university women is of utmost importance, teachers of women should know how to connect their subject matter with the particular concerns and sensitivities of women so as to help them develop the technical skills in the wider context of their essence. The curriculum must be directed at the total education of person and not only certain aspects. It must not be purely abstract but should be related to the concrete and the person.

CONCLUSION

In a culture that did not allow women to get involved in business without the sponsorship of men St. Josemaria in his characteristic progressive thinking advised women in 1965:

*"Develop yourselves personally in society, among women, in work similar to that fulfilled in the world of your brothers; and undertake, as they do, all types of professional, social and political positions, etc."*⁴

Educators in Strathmore and indeed in all education institutions must remember that gender differences are better celebrated than suppressed, that the difference of woman does indeed make a difference. Her sensitivity to relationship offers a special gift in transforming society.

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⁴ Josemaria Escriva, Letter, 29 July 1965.

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